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SUBJECT: COMBATTING ECUADOR'S INCREASING REFUGEE POPULATION

¶1. SUMMARY: This cable summarizes a review of the World Food Program's (WFP) assistance to Colombian refugees (defined in this cable as persons of concern) in northern Ecuador. The review was conducted by Barry Burnett, USAID/DCHA/FFP, over the period April 6 - April 10, 2009 and included field trips to Ibarra, Tulcan, and San Lorenzo in northern Ecuador. Mr. Burnett also interviewed representatives of WFP, UNHCR, USAID/Ecuador, IOM, Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS), and Colombian refugees. Findings indicate that Colombian refugee levels are increasing, both along the northern border with Colombia and elsewhere in the country. UN agencies and their implementing partners are providing critically needed assistance to this growing refugee population. However, it is estimated that the scope of current operations will need to be expanded to meet the rising needs.

MORE COLOMBIANS FLEEING THE CONFLICT AT THE BORDER

¶2. The long-standing conflict between Government of Colombia forces and illegal armed groups has resulted in the displacement of up to 4.4 million Colombians, with tens of thousands seeking refuge in Ecuador, Venezuela and Panama. UNHCR estimates that Ecuador is hosting at least 135,000 persons of concern, of which 22,000 have been granted refugee status and another 72,000 have pending asylum applications with the GOE. One of WFP's key implementing partners, HIAS, is responsible for making initial contact with refugees and providing guidance, orientation and emergency assistance, including food aid and counseling. HIAS reported that the refugee level was 30 percent higher in the period November 2008 to March 2009 than the refugee level recorded in the previous ten months, January 2008 to October 2008.

WFP ASSISTING 11,000 WITH FOOD AID AND TRAINING

¶3. WFP's food assistance program is currently reaching nearly 11,000 of the most food-insecure refugees and other highly vulnerable people in host communities. Total WFP beneficiaries are projected to increase as the level of refugees continues to rise. WFP is increasing the provision of food-for-training and food-for-work as it seeks to accelerate recovery operations in 2009 and beyond.

¶4. Site visits indicated, for example, that WFP food distributions supplement provisions from small family plots for a group of elderly refugees and food-insecure elders in the host-community. WFP complements food distributions with lessons about health and nutrition delivered to beneficiaries in biweekly meetings. WFP also trains women in a variety of handicrafts and businesses (e.g. fish marketing) to improve their livelihoods. In certain communities, WFP distributes food aid to refugee children being attended to by state-funded baby-sitters so their mothers can go to work.

¶5. During a high-profile ceremony in Ibarra in northern Ecuador commemorating the distribution of Title II-funded fortified wheat flour for which U.S. Ambassador Heather Hodges was the guest-of-honor, senior GOE officials made clear their appreciation for the assistance but urged that other countries recognize the severity of the growing refugee problem and lend assistance.

According to UNHCR sources, the GOE has provided some \$40 million in support of health care, education and registration for Colombian refugees.

NEW GOE/UN PROGRAM REGISTERS REFUGEES IN ONE DAY

¶6. Prior to being officially recognized as a refugee, asylum seekers are not allowed to seek employment, forcing a greater dependence on basic services, including food aid. Recently, with UNHCR support, the GOE agreed to an accelerated registration process that cuts down the time required to obtain refugee identification cards from nine months to one day. About 1,300 Colombians were granted refugee status in the first two weeks of the initiative (March 23-April 3, 2009). UNHCR expects it will take some time to fully institutionalize the accelerated registration process, but it is a promising start.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

¶7. A. The flow of Colombian refugees across Ecuador's northern border shows no sign of abating; quite the opposite, NGO contacts indicated that this flow appears to have increased in recent months.

¶B. UN institutions, in particular WFP and UNHCR, are rendering critically important emergency services to Colombian refugees, including food aid, counseling, orientation, and training, to facilitate their transition from Colombia to Ecuador. The challenges facing the UN and other institutions seeking to improve refugee conditions are complicated by the presence of illegal armed groups, the flow of drugs from Colombia across sections of the border to the Pacific Ocean and on to foreign markets, and Ecuador's high rate of unemployment and underemployment (8.5 and 53 percent respectively as of February 2009).

¶C. The Ecuadorian military patrols the northern border region and protects against armed incursions, as well as the illegal flow of drugs, weapons and other contraband. The GOE is also seeking to coordinate assistance efforts aimed at strengthening economic conditions along the northern border. In this context, WFP and UNHCR should use its strong presence in the region to continue to assist the GOE in coordinating relief efforts in northern Ecuador.

¶D. WFP will undertake an assessment of its food aid program later this year and will likely recommend a larger program, with greater attention to rehabilitation efforts. Such an approach would appear consistent with the conditions observed and outlined above.

Hodges